

BECKY HAGENSTON

Midnight, Licorice, Shadow

"Midnight, Licorice, Shadow," she says. "Cocoa, Casper, Dr. Livingston."

"Alfred Hitchcock," he says. "Dracula. Vincent Price."

They have had the cat for nearly three days.

"Cinderblock?" she tries. "Ice bucket?"

It's useless. The harder they try to think of a name, the more elusive it becomes.

"Tomorrow, then," Jeremy says. "If we don't have a name by tomorrow morning, it's bye-bye, Mr. Kitty. No offense, Cupcake," he tells the cat, and gives it a quick rub on the head.

Donna looks at the animal, sprawled on the orange motel carpet like a black bearskin rug. One of his fangs is showing. His monkey paws are kneading at the air.

"Monkey Paw!" she says, but Jeremy is already headed out the door, car keys jangling. He'd invited her to go along—there's some house in Redlands he wants to check out—but she wants to stay with the cat, who now has his eyes closed in feline ecstasy and is purring louder than the air conditioner. She doesn't want to leave him (Merlin? Jasper?) all alone in a strange motel. In an hour or so she'll walk across the parking lot to the Carrows and get a chef's salad for her and a cheeseburger for Jeremy (he always comes back hungry) and maybe she'll give some of her dinner

to the cat. They've been feeding him dry food because, as Jeremy says, wet food makes a cat's shits stinkier. Donna thinks the cat's shits are stinky enough as it is. Still, she likes him. She wants the three of them to drive off together tomorrow morning, like a family on vacation. So far, they've traveled over five hundred miles together, the cat curled up on Donna's lap while Jeremy drives.

If she can just come up with his name, the way she came up with her own. She was born Lacey Love and changed her name to Donna when she left home at sixteen. She liked the wholesome, 1950's sound of it, the name of a girl in a song. Sometimes she thinks about changing it again, to something more serious: Joan, perhaps, or Agnes. More and more, she feels like a Joan or an Agnes.

"Tango," she says to the cat. "Flower. Bambi. Mr. Jarvis."

The cat jerks his head up and fixes his yellow eyes on hers in what seems like an accusatory way, but she tells herself he must have heard something outside that startled him, something too faint for human ears.

When they first met, she had almost told Jeremy that her name was Sunshine—partly as a joke but partly because she *felt* like a Sunshine

right then, surrounded by wildflowers by the side of I-10, halfway between Tucson and Phoenix.

"I would have believed you," he told her later. "Because you are my sunshine. My *only* sunshine," he added, in a low growl. He was prone to saying cheesy things, but he said them in a way that seemed mean and dangerous, and therefore struck her as truthful. For instance, the first time he called her his soul mate, he had his right hand around her neck and he squeezed just enough to let her know he meant business. "I *know* things about you," he said to her, staring her in the eyes, and she knew those things had nothing to do with any part of her past—certainly not the Lacey Love part of her past—but with who she was at that moment, Donna with Jeremy's hand on her neck.

The things Jeremy knows about her are more mysterious and important than the things he doesn't know. He doesn't know, for instance, that she'd been married and divorced at eighteen, though she would certainly have told him if he asked. He's never asked about her family or her childhood, which she finds refreshing. Why did men always pretend they cared about that? If they could get you to spill one childhood memory, they figured they could get you into bed.

And she always lied about the childhood memory anyway, making something up about her dog being smashed by her father's Oldsmobile when she was seven, right before her eyes. She'd told a man she met at a skanky bar outside of Alamogordo that her uncle had diddled her for three years, from the time she was seven (a lie), and the man had taken her back to his foul-smelling

motel room and laid her down on the bed and said, "Now tell old Terry how your uncle did you."

Sometimes it makes her smile, thinking about old Terry waking up the next morning with a concussion and his car and wallet stolen.

She told Jeremy she was twenty-three, which was the truth, and he told her he was twenty-four, though he seems much older. Still, she has no reason not to believe him. And what do ages matter anyway?

If Jeremy had asked her what she was doing there on the side of I-10 in the middle of a field of yellow wildflowers, she would have told him the truth: she'd been driving for seven hours and needed to pee so badly her vision was blurring. But he didn't ask. He pulled over and jogged toward her and then stopped and said, "There you are."

"Here I am," she said. It didn't hurt that he was handsome, and that the sun was going down in a particularly spectacular way, and that she wasn't headed anywhere in particular, and that she hadn't eaten in almost twenty-four hours. The mountains in the distance were prehistoric creatures that could rise up and stomp them both. She had no problem leaving old Terry's crappy Datsun on the side of the road and getting into Jeremy's white pick-up truck. He took her to a truck stop and bought her a BLT and then to Kmart for shoes and underwear and a bathing suit.

That was three weeks ago.

"Sink Drip," she says to the cat, which is still sprawled on the floor, eyes closed. She wishes he would be a little bit more attentive. "Moldy Shower," she says, and sighs. It's getting old,

living in crappy motel rooms. Soon, they'll have enough money to buy someplace nice, maybe in the mountains. "Which mountains?" she'd asked, and Jeremy said, "Any of them. All of them."

She turns on the television. "Stone Phillips," she says. The cat's toes and whiskers twitch, in some kind of cat dream. She leans down next to his ear. "Get it," she whispers. "Catch that mouse. Good boy."

The first car she'd ever stolen, when she was eighteen, belonged to her landlord—hers and Tim's. Tim was her husband, a thirty-eight-year-old slightly retarded janitor she'd met at the Catty Shack Catfish House in Tupelo, Mississippi. He was so charming that at first you didn't realize he was retarded. She'd married him because she was tired of living in a trailer with Ilene, a community college student who shot up heroin with her Western Civ. book propped on her knees.

But after a couple of months of married life, she realized she'd had enough; she'd gotten fired at Catty Shack for slapping Tim's face in front of customers and calling him a fucking retard. The worst part of all was that then Tim had started to cry. He threw his mop on the floor and ran out the door, got in his truck, and a day later he still hadn't come back.

She was standing at the kitchen window, eating a peanut butter and butter sandwich and staring across the yard at Mr. Harvey, the landlord, when she got the idea. Mr. Harvey kept trying to save her and Tim, coming to the door with pamphlets and tiny green New Testaments. His car, a silver

Nissan, was parked as usual in the driveway, coated yellow with the pollen that blew all through northern Mississippi that time of year. He was out on his front porch, setting for a spell (as he called it; he was always trying to get Donna to set for a spell with him) with an old black lady who was nearly as crazy as he was. Donna had taken him for a racist, an ex-Klan member perhaps (he reminded her of her daddy) and so this friendship surprised and confused her. She liked to have people figured out.

Then Mr. Harvey and the old black lady stood up and started heading down the street, chatting intently. Even he had a friend. And there she was, eighteen years old, married to a retard, fired from a catfish restaurant, and there didn't seem to be a good reason *not* to enter Mr. Harvey's back porch—it smelled like boiled vegetables and grease and tobacco—and take the car keys from his kitchen table.

She left a note: *I need this to do the Lord's work, will return it to you in 2 days, please do not call the police. GOD BLESS YOU.*

Then she found some money, too—in a sock in his underwear drawer (just like her daddy after all), and took off for the West, where anything could happen.

It was a hundred and six degrees today, according to the Weather Channel, and even at seven in the evening the heat comes off the asphalt in waves. "Why is it so smoggy and suffocating here?" she'd asked Jeremy. "I thought California was supposed to be sunny and beachy and fun,

with celebrities all over the place.”

“This here’s the Inland Empire,” he said. Whatever that meant; it sounded like something out of *Star Wars*. They’d driven past charred hillsides, palm trees burnt up like match heads. And yet, people live here; they even come here on vacation. The Carrows across the parking lot is full of families: weary-looking mothers; stern, sunburned fathers; cranky children. They take up all the benches and fill up the vestibule.

Her pick-up order isn’t ready yet, so she stands at the brochure stand and flips through the Area Attractions: Joshua Tree National Park, Death Valley, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Disneyland. Donna didn’t tell Jeremy this, but she actually wouldn’t mind going to Disneyland; she might actually enjoy it. But Jeremy has a low tolerance for people—except for her, of course. Yesterday, when they first arrived and checked in, they’d come here for lunch and Jeremy had been so annoyed that he’d handed her a twenty and told her to get something to bring back to the room.

“Excuse me,” says someone. “Ma’am?” A large man in khaki shorts and a Van Halen tour T-shirt is standing up, pointing to a place on a bench. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

“Thank you!” she says. “I appreciate that.”

People could be so kind; that’s one thing she’s just beginning to understand about the world since she met Jeremy. Even the sweaty, tired-looking families around her seem like they get along; nobody’s crying or smacking anyone; no one’s kneeled down whispering threats in anybody’s ear.

When she picks up her order finally, she looks back at the khaki-pants man on the way out the door; he’s telling a little girl something that’s making her laugh. Yes, people aren’t so bad after all, and they don’t expect you to be bad, either.

That’s the thing. They don’t expect you to be bad. It’s amazing, she thinks—walking across the parking lot, pocket knife clutched between her knuckles—that in this day and age, people will just let you into their houses, that they will look out their peepholes and see two complete strangers standing there, and then pull the door open.

That’s what Mrs. Jarvis had done. She had greeted them with an expression of confusion and expectation, as if they had been standing there holding gift-wrapped boxes. “Yes?” she had said, and that’s when Jeremy (who had gotten her name from the mailbox) said, “I’m sorry to bother you, but is Mr. Jarvis home?”

“No?” the woman answered, as if this were a quiz show and she wasn’t certain what she’d won but knew—knew—that she’d won something. “Is this about the boat?” she said then (and Donna nearly laughed out loud—a boat!) and Jeremy said, without missing a beat, “Yes, it is.”

“I’m sorry, but we already sold that,” Mrs. Jarvis said, smiling. “Thanks for coming by, though.”

The plan wasn’t to go inside; the plan was to get a sense of the place, see if there was anything worth stealing and come back for it later.

“Can I use your bathroom?” Donna said then. She could practically feel Jeremy’s heart beating harder; she could feel the heat coming off of him in waves that almost made her dizzy.

The truth was, she had briefly forgotten about the plan. She suddenly wanted to see inside the house; she wanted to know if it was full of votive candles and Hummels, and if there was a room where everything—the furniture, the carpet—was covered in clear plastic like there was in her grandmother's home—the entire living room forbidden entry by anyone other than “company,” who she never saw.

She wanted to see if there was a bathroom cabinet full of pill bottles and if there were razor blades under the sink, and if the whole house smelled of disinfectant and Bengay.

And Mrs. Jarvis had just kept smiling. “Please,” she said, “won’t you come in.”

Jeremy’s truck isn’t there yet, but that’s fine. “Here I am, Kitty-Kitty,” she announces, opening the door. “Did you miss me?”

And the cat did miss her, because he comes leaping up on the bed like a dog to meow at her, welcoming her back.

She’d left the television on to keep him company. Donna loves cable TV, but Jeremy thinks it’s dangerous. Last night, they had fallen asleep watching *Law and Order*, the cat curled up at the foot of their bed, and had woken up to some espionage movie.

Jeremy had jumped out of bed, saying, “Shit! Shit! We shouldn’t have done that!”

“Done what?”

“Left the TV on all night. Fuck.” Then he told her that all the stuff that had been on all night long had seeped into their subconscious, and they

had no idea what it might have done to them, what kind of bad ideas and thoughts might have gotten into their brains. He grabbed the TV guide and they saw it had been a *Law and Order* marathon and he was even more pissed off.

“Better than *Golden Girls*,” she’d said. “We might’ve woken up thinking we were horny old ladies.” He didn’t think that was funny.

Jeremy likes watching nature programs and documentaries about haunted houses. He told her that when he was a little boy, he’d seen a ghost appear to him in his bedroom mirror and tell him that his grandfather was about to die. “And three days later, he did. He wasn’t even sick!”

And after that he’d had “the gift”—he didn’t specify exactly what the gift was, just that it made him realize when something was right (like when he saw her by the side of the road with the wildflowers) or wrong (like not having a name for the cat).

She knows Jeremy wants to keep the cat, because on the way home after they found him, Jeremy had stopped at Wal-Mart—leaving her and the kitty (Biscuit? Muffin?) in the car with the air conditioner running—and came back with a litter box, litter, a ball full of cat nip, and a bag of expensive, veterinarian-recommended chow made with salmon and spinach. “Nothing but the best for Whoosits,” he said.

“Maybe we should call him Bluebell,” she suggested. “Because of the blue bell around his neck. It’s kind of obvious, but it’s cute.”

Then Jeremy frowned and didn’t say anything until they got back to their motel room. They set

the cat on the floor and he immediately lay down and began purring.

"Bluebell likes us," she said.

"His name isn't Bluebell," Jeremy said. "I think you know that. It doesn't fit."

And he was right; it didn't. This cat was stronger and bigger than a Bluebell. He was more of a . . . what?

"I don't like not knowing his name," Jeremy said, later that evening when they were eating take-out and watching a special on the Roman ghosts of Yorkshire. "It's bad luck. Not knowing something's name is like having a bad spirit floating around. Until we know what to call him, we won't be safe." He took a bite of his cheeseburger. "Three days, and if we don't have a name for him, he's history."

Then he closed his eyes and sniffed the air, which he did sometimes, as if he could sense things coming from miles, days, even weeks away. Once he'd done this—after a job in Sedona—and said, "Trouble. We've gotta get the hell out of here." They'd packed up that night and driven up to Utah, and they hadn't had any trouble at all.

"Three days," Jeremy repeated. "And that's pushing it."

At nine-thirty, when Jeremy hasn't come back yet, Donna eats her chef's salad and gives all the ham to the cat, who rubs his head against her hand again and again even when there's nothing left. He knows that if she had more, she would give it to him. "You're a smart cat," she tells him. (Einstein?) Then she thinks: Maybe he doesn't

want anything. Maybe he's just being nice.

Outside her window, there's the sound of a family walking down the pavement toward their room, a little boy whining about his sunburn, a mother telling him she warned him, didn't she? The voices get fainter, then a door opens and slams shut.

Before her daddy ran off and her mother went crazy and Donna (Lacey Love) went to live with her grandmother in Jackson—in the house with all the plastic on the furniture—they had all gone on a family trip to Vicksburg. "This field was running with blood," her daddy said. "Right where we're standing." Her mother had sighed and trembled. Her grandmother had refused to get out of the car. She had wanted to go to Dollywood.

Donna peeks out the window. The parking lot is nearly half empty; the fortunate families are staying down the street at the Holiday Inn or the Ramada. She steps out into the hot desert air, the pavement warm beneath her bare feet.

"You have a real knack for this kind of thing," Jeremy had told her—the way she's able to scan an entire parking lot and know which car is unlocked, or which trunk is not latched. "I'm good at guessing," she told him. "I'm lucky."

And she's lucky again tonight, locating a red Honda Civic with a piece of fabric—a beach blanket—sticking out of the trunk. The laptop is right on top—asking to be stolen, really—and she digs around a little more and finds some back packs that don't interest her, and some AAA tour books, and some sun visors. She closes the trunk carefully and quietly. Before she met Jeremy, she

would have taken the car and driven away, just because she could, but she hasn't wanted to do that in weeks. She's not sure she even could anymore.

"We're not bad people," Jeremy had told her. "We're just getting by in a world that's fucked us over."

When she asked him how the world had fucked him over, he'd sighed and his eyes had gotten damp, and he'd held her and stroked her hair—as if to say all that didn't matter, now that he'd found her.

She takes the laptop inside and places it on the nightstand. Inside the nightstand, she knows, is the ubiquitous Bible; it's as if it's the same one, following them from town to town, wanting something. She thinks of Mr. Harvey, can almost imagine him sneaking into the rooms and placing them furtively in drawers, convinced that he's saving the world. But she knows it's more complicated than that. Her mother thought she was saved, even when she was taking her clothes off in the middle of Wal-Mart, even when the doctor was giving her a shot in the arm to keep her from pulling out all her hair.

Donna has Jeremy, and that's better than salvation.

"Good old Mrs. Jarvis," Jeremy had said, in a playful, affectionate way, when they were standing in her living room. He was tapping his gun against his palm, thoughtfully, though there was nothing really to think about.

"I'm not old," Mrs. Jarvis said. "I'm only forty-seven. I have a daughter at Bryn Mawr.

My husband is dead. I'm the only person she has left."

Donna had drifted through the house, which was bright and sunny and smelled nothing at all like disinfectant. It smelled like flowers. There was no fancy "company" room. The bathroom was green and pink, with a shower curtain of plastic pink flowers. The tub was empty, of course—no old lady lying there with a razor blade beside her, her eyes closed under the red water.

There was a lime tree growing in black dirt. The limes were hard and small but she took two of them anyway and put them in her pocket. She wondered if the daughter at Bryn Mawr had played in this garden as a little girl, if she'd had tea parties and cut up little limes for her dolls. Donna—back when she was Lacey Love—had made dolls out of her mother's stockings, had set them around the card table and given them Dixie cups of cold Sanka.

Later, when her grandmother took her to the hospital for a visit, her mother would hold her on her lap—even though she was getting too big for that—and sing a song from her own childhood: *Donna, Donna, where can you be? Where can you be?*

The gunshot came as if from far away—a distant *pop*, like a toy, and she wondered vaguely if the Bryn Mawr girl would come back here and pack up her own toys, and where she would go, and if she had someone who loved her the way Jeremy loved Donna.

Jeremy stuck his head out the screen door. "Let's hit the road," he said. "Maybe get some Wendy's

on the way."

That's when the black cat dashed out the door, blue collar jingling. One of his paws had blood on it.

"There you are," Jeremy said, and scooped him up.

"Cutie," said Donna. "Let's take him with us."

"He's ours," said Jeremy.

She must have fallen asleep. When she hears the door open, the cat (Rex? Blossom?) is curled up next to her, on Jeremy's pillow.

"Aww," says Jeremy. "So, what'd you come up with?"

"Where were you?"

"I had a hard time finding a place. Damn guard dogs everywhere, and alarms and shit like that. I couldn't get a break. It was like an omen or something. Bad luck." He looks at the cat. "That's how I know you didn't come up with a name for him."

"Noodle," she tells him, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. Jeremy gives her a long look.

"I think you know that his name isn't Noodle."

"He looks like a noodle! Sort of. Doesn't he?"

But Jeremy is right. Noodle is wrong.

"Maybe the name of a famous person," she suggests. "Or a movie character. Like, Clyde, of Bonnie and Clyde. Or maybe Billy the Kid. Or Sundance."

Jeremy is shaking his head. Daylight is leaking under the thick orange curtains, staining the

carpet with smears of brightness.

"Potsie!" she says, and laughs. "Or maybe Cousin Oliver."

"Nope," says Jeremy, and moves closer to the bed, where the cat is sprawled blissfully on the pillow, one yellow eye barely visible. He rubs the cat on its stomach, and the cat stretches even further, his back legs twitching.

"Let's just keep him," Donna whispers, but Jeremy already has the cat by the neck, is squeezing with both hands while the cat (Inky! Frodo!) flails and twists and opens his poor little mouth and waves his paws in the air, his back legs frantically clawing at Jeremy's hands, until finally Donna looks away, sobbing, and there's a *crack*, and when she looks again, Jeremy is holding the limp cat on his lap, petting it. The tops of his hands are bleeding.

She watches as Jeremy picks up the animal and carries it outside; she hears something thud into the dumpster outside their room, then Jeremy reappears and heads into the bathroom to wash his hands.

"Are you going to get ready?" he asks her.

She doesn't answer.

"Donna?"

"I don't feel like a Donna anymore," she admits, and something in Jeremy's eyes goes dark and bright and dark again. "I think I feel like a Joan," she tells him quickly, but as soon as she says it she knows it's wrong; she's not a Joan, any more than she's a Lacey Love or a Sunshine or a Donna.

Donna, where can you be?

"Agnes?" she says, but that's not right, either.

"Linda," Jeremy says, coming toward her, and she can see it in eyes, how badly he wants that to fit, but it doesn't. "Betty," he says, holding one of her hands in both of his own. "Amber. Millicent.

Penny."

"Helen," she whispers back. "Cynthia, Regina, Anne."